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SUBJECT: HARIRI VISIT FURTHERS OPENING TO ARAB NEIGHBORS,
SNUBS TEHRAN

Classified By: Ambassador Ryan C. Crocker for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: Lebanese MP and Future Movement leader Saad Hariri on July 17 briefed Ambassador Crocker and General Petraeus at the end of his one-day visit to Baghdad and Najaf. Hariri viewed the trip as an opportunity to increase contacts and understanding between his Saudi allies and both the GOI and Najaf hawza, and reported tentative but promising interest among all parties. He said Ayatollah Sistani was particularly interested in the latest from Saudi King Abdallah, and that Prime Minister Maliki is misunderstood and deserves more from his Arab neighbors. On regional matters, Hariri fretted that recent developments could strengthen the hand of Iran and Syria. End summary.

Baghdad, Najaf Meetings Explore Openings to Riyadh

¶2. (C) Hariri first summarized his meetings with the Baghdad political leadership, the positive results of which he pledged to brief to the Saudi leadership. Hariri called Prime Minister Maliki "misunderstood" in Arab capitals, acknowledged that Maliki had passed him a message for the Saudi king, and said he would stress that Arabs cannot continue to argue that the Americans made a mistake in 2003 when they invaded Iraq. He commented that the Arabs now must accept "that it is done" and that "this is 2008." Hariri reported that he and Maliki met one-on-one for over an hour, noting that he was probably the first Arab political figure to call and congratulate Maliki when the latter became Prime Minister in 2006. Maliki expressed frustration over the cold shoulder from King Abdullah and stressed his desire for a better relationship. Hariri said he came away from the meeting with a very favorable impression of Maliki as a leader and as an Arab. Hariri then met for lunch with the Presidency Council. Hariri provided no substantive details of the lunch with Talabani but noted that it is clear that in the Iraqi system power resides with the PM and not the President. He finished his Baghdad meetings with the Council of Representatives (COR) leadership, and reported that he had prayed with Speaker Mashhadani, a fellow Sunni.

¶3. (C) In addition to Baghdad, half of Hariri's visit had been in Najaf, where he said Ayatollah Sistani was interested in little except the Saudi King, who he mentioned at least six times. According to Hariri, Sistani lauded the Kingdom's effective service delivery and asked Hariri if Abdallah requires anything from the hawza, wishes to schedule a meeting, or had sent a specific message for Sistani. Hariri did not elaborate on his response to Sistani, but said he would encourage Abdallah to establish a channel to Sistani. Hariri met also with Ayatollah Hakim, who responded enthusiastically to Hariri's proposal to deepen the relationship between Lebanese Shia and the Najaf hawza as an alternative to Qum. As a first step, Hariri plans to send a group of Lebanese Shia students to meet Hakim. Hariri also reported having met with ISCI heir apparent Ammar al-Hakim at the latter's Najaf office, after ISCI provided logistical support for his Najaf meetings.

¶4. (C) Hariri expressed concern that Syria and Iran have gained strength due to perceived diplomatic openings this month. On Syria, Hariri said the Mediterranean conference in Paris has let President Asad claim he has achieved a diplomatic breakthrough and that after Paris "Asad doesn't look at all" to the Syrian people. He linked Asad's perceived strength to Hizballah leader Hasan Nasrallah's unprecedented recent statement that the Lebanese Armed Forces should take over all the country's security -- Hariri interpreted this not as deference but a sign of Nasrallah's increasing confidence. On Iran, Hariri questioned the wisdom of sending a high-level U.S. diplomat to the P5 1 meeting in Geneva, and Hariri claimed that this initiative deeply concerned Riyadh as well. He noted that antipathy to Iran was one reason for his Baghdad visit -- he remarked that Iranian Foreign Minister Mottaki recently invited him to Tehran as a reward for better behavior, which so irritated Hariri that he instead visited Baghdad to insult the Iranians.

Comment

¶5. (C) Given Hariri's close relationship with the Saudi leadership, his visit sends an important signal of Iraq's increasing acceptance by its key Arab neighbors, and reinforces a trend of broader Arab engagement that recently has included the Emirati Foreign Minister's visit and Kuwait's formal announcement of its Ambassador to Iraq. Furthermore, for Iraq's mainstream Shia at the highest

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levels to receive Hariri warmly displays a degree of independence from Tehran. Finally, his meetings at the hawza and with Ammar al-Hakim are an important demonstration of the Sunni-Shia comity which may be re-emerging in Iraq. End Summary.

CROCKER